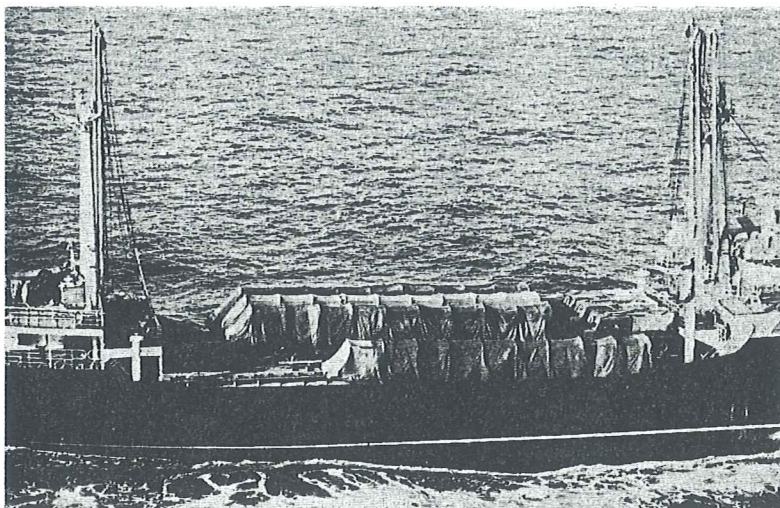




Cuban missiles returning to Russia: 'How many more sunsets?'

The Thirteen Days

THE MISSILE CRISIS. By Elie Abel.
220 pages. Lippincott. \$4.95.

The golden beauty of that autumn morning, which might have been the world's last, seemed incongruous and mocking. On that Sunday, Oct. 28, 1962, at the height of the Cuban missile crisis, Under Secretary of State George Ball, walking into the White House with Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara for a twelfth-hour meeting with President Kennedy and his Executive Committee, said: "It reminds me of the Georgia O'Keeffe painting that has a rose growing out of an ox skull."

The previous evening, on his way back to the Pentagon, McNamara had paused to admire the beauty of the setting sun over the Potomac—and stood "wondering how many more sunsets he was destined to see." The previous midnight, President Kennedy, with holocaust on his mind, had closed a meeting by saying: "Now it can go either way."

Confrontation: For the better part of two weeks, he had been standing, as Dean Rusk remarked to McGeorge Bundy, "eyeball to eyeball" with Khrushchev; and ever since the confrontation had been made public nearly a week earlier, the world had stopped breathing. It was not to resume until later that Sunday when the Soviet leader finally consented to the "discontinuation of further work on weapons construction sites . . . [and] to dismantle the arms which you described as offensive, and to crate and return them to the Soviet Union."

The Cuban missile crisis (tensely reported in this book, virtually hour by hour, by NBC's London bureau chief Elie Abel) was touched off, in effect, on Sunday, Oct. 14, when U.S. Intelligence

aerial reconnaissance experts, analyzing U-2 photographs taken over Cuba, found unmistakable evidence of sites of Soviet medium-range ballistic missiles—an invasion of nuclear weapons 90 miles from U.S. territory. Further flights reconfirmed that evidence—and disclosed that the missiles would soon be operable. Immediate action was essential.

Nuclear Poker: Of the alternatives placed before the President and his committee—running from a "soft" line all the way to aerial attack followed by land invasion—naval "quarantine" was decided upon as the "least dangerous" first step, the others to follow if that proved ineffective. The U.S. was in the midst of what Abel calls the "thirteen beautiful October days in 1962 [when] the young President of the United States played nuclear poker with Nikita Khrushchev and won." After the blockade had been instituted, the Soviet U.N. delegation's press officer concluded a discussion with a U.S. delegation information officer. "This could well be our last conversation," he said. "New York will be blown up tomorrow by Soviet nuclear weapons."

In retrospect, what is most interesting is the play of personality and character under pressure. Former Secretary of State Dean Acheson was one of the "war hawks," arguing for air strike; but Robert Kennedy, when the question of "surprise attack" was raised, snapped: "My brother is not going to be the Tojo of the 1960s." A stricken Adlai Stevenson proposed withdrawal from Guantánamo and removal of Jupiter missiles out of Turkey in exchange for Soviet withdrawal from Cuba—the position that later led to the charge that "Adlai wanted a Munich," when what he wanted was a position he could defend in conscience before the United Nations.

That final Sunday evening, when all

Newsweek, February 14, 1966

BOOKS

was over but the technicalities, the President relaxed with his brother. "Maybe this is the night I should go to the theater," he cracked. The brothers, Abel reports, "laughed uproariously. Both were thinking of Ford's Theater."